



# MAGNITUDE OF CRIME IN EARLY COLONIAL NADIA DISTRICT IN BENGAL: 1793-1856

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## ABSTRACT

Nadia was one of the largest districts in the colonial Bengal. In the formative years of colonial administration, interior parts of Bengal had witnessed widespread crime and criminal activities. It was perpetrated largely by the antisocial elements of the society. Nadia was a crime prone district as it was being described in the official narratives. Nadia was certainly an area of high crime zone for a few selective heinous crimes like dacoity, murder and burglary. This district always stood high in the rank of crime list of the Bengal districts. But this paper has shown that Nadia was not the most crime prone district in the period under discussion.

**KEYWORDS:** Colonial, Nadia, Crime, Bengal.

The period under discussion is considered a period of administrative consolidation of East India Company in the Bengal provinces. Various steps had been taken to improve the administrative efficiency, especially in the police administration. The purposes were to maintain peace and tranquility as well as law and order in the interior. It was necessary for exploiting the rural surplus of production. To prove the ability of foreign rulers to reign over the country in the better way than the traditional rulers was also a necessity. Controlling crimes and criminals were the principal test for the infant foreign state power to evince its executive skill and ability. Apart from the effort of increasing administrative efficiency, the Company Raj introduced various criminal laws for curbing crime. Boundaries and areas of the Bengal districts were frequently re-arranged and reshaped for the same purpose. The intention of this paper is to explore the situation of crime and criminality in Nadia district during the phase of administrative centralization and consolidation of the colonial government.

Nadia was predominantly an agricultural district. Overwhelming majority of inhabitants was staying in the villages; most of them were engaged in cultivation. Land was very fertile and conducive to all kinds of crops and vegetables. We have hardly any proper knowledge about the condition of common people before the advent of colonial rulers in the district for the paucity of materials. However, Nadia as a district was large no doubt. In 1814 its length was about 140 miles and the breadth about 40 miles.<sup>1</sup> The total number of inhabitants in 1802 was 764430 according to an estimate.<sup>2</sup> The density of population in 1836 was 154.98 per square miles<sup>3</sup> and in 1860, 307 per square miles.<sup>4</sup> Nadia as a district was neither most populous nor dense in comparison to other neighbouring districts.<sup>5</sup> But in the crime chart, the rank of this district was quite high. This paper has narrated various types of crime to examine the magnitude of crime of Nadia.

The numerical return of various offences of this district was quite high right from the beginning of this study. Almost every crime report of this district used to surpass its previous statements of various offences. From 1791 to 1800 there were 815 trials held for all kinds of offences in which altogether 2465 persons were tried in court of circuit in Nadia.<sup>6</sup> Obviously this number is not the true indication of criminality of this district. It contained the numbers of those offences which were tried into the court of justice and did not reflect the actual numbers which came into the notice of the police. Out of this number, however, the cases were 248 of robberies, 106 of murder and 256 of burglaries and thefts.<sup>7</sup> These four offences, both numerically and also in the perception of anti-crime agencies, were dominant throughout the period of our study. The first decade of nineteenth century in Nadia was the decade for the gang robbers and robberies. In this period, other offences were few in number in comparison to robbery. In 1805 and 1806, 353 dacoities were reported, whereas burglaries and thefts had been reported as 87 and 70 in number respectively.<sup>8</sup> For the next few years domination of dacoity crime had continued until 1808. In that year the number of dacoities reported was 329 and in subsequent year the number was 65. It can be assumed that dacoities and burglaries were committed most often by the same sorts of offenders. The information I had collected clearly indicate that whenever robbery was suppressed by the criminal departments, burglaries began to increase. This conjecture had been acknowledged by the administrative authorities of this district also.<sup>9</sup> Shakespeare, an ex-judge of this district who described in a letter to the Acting Judge two cases of burglary at Santipore in which 40 persons were apprehended, remarked "the two cases are not simple cases of burglary committed by one or two persons, but repeated acts of house breaking, perpetrated by different men forming part of gangs regularly organized you will observe some of the prisoners have before been apprehended for dacoity and many of the old dacoits now at large, finding the small risk attending the commission of burglary

compared with that of present attending the perpetration of dacoity, are forming themselves into gangs of burglars."<sup>10</sup> From 1811 to 1818 the total dacoity was reported as 40 averaging only 5, whereas total burglaries reported were 2857 on yearly average of 357.12.<sup>11</sup> But this conjecture has limit in application as we would see in later that both dacoity and house breaking had arisen in tandem.

The fifth report of 1812 frankly admitted that, the police reforms of Lord Cornwallis in 1793 failed to bring down the rate of crime in Bengal presidency. The echo of the same was found in the remark of the magistrate of Nadia. In 1802 in a reply to the questionnaire of the Governor General in council, C. Oldfield, the magistrate categorically said that the number of crimes committed annually in this district had progressively increased since 1791 particularly in late years.<sup>12</sup> In the first decade of nineteenth century gang robberies were increasing in the majority of Bengal district which prompted the Government to find a more efficient crime control mechanism for crushing the dacoity menace. On the recommendation of various judges of the court of circuits and Mr. Dowdeswell, the secretary in judicial department, the Government created a post of superintendent of police<sup>13</sup> and at the same time enacted a few number of regulations to contain the robbery and other offences. In 1808 the proclamation of robbery act had been passed and in 1810 reward for apprehension of dacoits was also enacted. To bring landlords under provision of the law to ensure their cooperation in apprehending criminals, Regulation 1 had been enacted in 1811 by the Governor General in Council. All these changes virtually failed to cut down the amount of crimes committed annually in Nadia. Dacoity had gone down considerably, but other forms of crime like burglary had increased substantially. From 1818 onwards again a series of regulations were again promulgated without much success in decreasing overall crime trend. By the regulation I of 1829, the post of superintendent of police had been abolished and the responsibility was made over to the commissioners of the court of revenue and circuits. The result was the same because total crimes, as far as Nadia was concerned, did not diminish at all.

Homicide and murder crime is considered everywhere and in case of every age as the most heinous crime. Nadia was a highly inclined district to this crime. In 1811 there were 34 murder crimes reported from this district.<sup>14</sup> Precise reason for murder crime is beyond our knowledge. Moreover, it would be unreasonable to search for precise cause of this crime. Rather it is meaningful to identify multiple factors of murder crime. Land disputes certainly explain many cases of murder. Personal vendetta sometimes resulted in murder. A few instances will indicate the nature of these offences. Police report for 1818 shows that 4 murder crimes were committed in Nadia. Remarking on this offence, the superintendent of Police said I shall pass over making any remarks upon them, the detail of which would only serve to display the petty jealousy and animosities which are so frequently the sole grounds of the commission of this crime.<sup>15</sup> It is apparently true that majority of murder crime was committed in Nadia over the dispute regarding women. In the second session of court of circuit in 1810, the trial of 19 murder cases held revealed that majority of them had arisen from intrigue concerned with women.<sup>16</sup> In 1845 a murder had been committed inside jail by a prisoner, because the murdered person had previously an intimacy with the perpetrator's wife. A meeting had been contrived outside the jail the day before and in revenge the murderer procured a *dao* with which during the night he cut the throat of his wife's paramour.<sup>17</sup> A man was murdered due to his criminal intercourse with murderer's wife.<sup>18</sup> A man murdered his wife because he had been fined by his *zamindar* for maltreating her.<sup>19</sup> The incidents of husbands killing their wives were common phenomena. In some cases reverse reaction was not very rare. Besoo, for instance, suspected his wife intriguing with a man called Suklal and his wife Bibijan killed him.<sup>20</sup> A man kept a mistress, whom two others coveted,

but she rejected their addresses. In consequence, one night they broke down into his house and put him to death.<sup>21</sup> Dispute over cattle trespass resulted into murder. In 1813, two murders were committed in consequence of disputes respecting the trespass of cattle.<sup>22</sup> In 1851 three murder cases were reported which were committed due to dispute over cattle trespassing.<sup>23</sup> The incidents of children being killed for sake of ornaments were occasionally reported. In 1855 a woman killed a girl for the sake of her ornaments.<sup>24</sup> A young girl of 8 years old had been murdered by Tullee Chand, for the sake of her ornaments.<sup>25</sup> A common informer and professional witness was murdered at night in his own house by a body of eight persons in 1841.<sup>26</sup> These examples evince that murder used to take place for variety of reasons.

Another significant offence which always attracted attention not only from district administration but also from the central authority was affray or riot. The district in question, as government document indicates, was notorious for affray crime. Every year especially in the season of reaping crops, it was frequently reported by the district administration. As Nadia was as famous as an indigo producing district, the presence of a large number of European planters made the district vulnerable to the affray or riot. Many administrators of this district attributed disturbances to indigo plantation in the interior. As John Turnbull who was the judge and magistrate of Nadia in 1820s remarked that "from the moment of ploughing the land and sowing the seed, to the season of reaping the crop, the whole district is thrown into a state of ferment. The most daring breaches of the peace are committed in the face of our police officers, and magistrate himself. In utter defiance of all law and authority, large bodies of armed men are avowed entertained for the express purpose of taking or retaining forcible possession of lands or crops. Violent affrays or rather regular pitched battles ensue, attended with bloodshed and homicide."<sup>27</sup> Boundary disputes certainly resulted in affrays. Reaping crops, establishing of respective influence and authority by *zamindars*, occupying hat (market), bazar etc were some major issues which always played crucial role in arising out of affrays. In 1854, 41 affrays and 107 attempted affrays were reported from this district.<sup>28</sup>

#### Situating Nadia in Bengal Crime Map

What was the position of Nadia in the crime chart of Bengal? Absence of continuous series of crime data makes it difficult to assess the above mentioned issue on long term basis. Still with some useful information we can obviously try to gauge the criminality of Nadia on short term basis which would not entirely be meaningless. During the period spanning from 1843 to 1850 a comparative discussion of available information regarding the crimes of Nadia and the whole of Bengal indicates intensity of crime prevailing in Nadia.

TABLE - III

Comparative number of total crime in Bengal provinces and Nadia: 1843-1850

Year	Total No. of crime in Bengal	% of increase or decrease	Total no. of crime in Nadia	% of increase or decrease
1843	56702		948	
1844	59588	5	1430	50.84
1845	67837	13	1764	23.35
1846	69995	3.1	1805	2.32
1847	72903	4.1	1979	9.63
1848	80882	10.9	1945	1.74 decrease
1849	82538	2	2041	4.93
1850	81335	1.4 decrease	2196	7.59

**Sources:** For Bengal, *Circular orders issued from the late office of the Superintendent of Police in the Lower Provinces to the Magisterial and other Criminal Authorities and to the Ferry Fund Committee from November 1837 to February 1854*, ed. W.R. Baillie, Calcutta, 1854 p. 249, for Nadia RSPLPB from 1844 to 1850

This table shows that overall crime was increasing in Bengal provinces. The difference is only in the percentage of increase. In total offence, the increase was higher in Nadia district than the Bengal average. In case of Nadia the average yearly increase of total crime is 12.11%, whereas the same for Bengal is 4.81%.<sup>29</sup> Among all kinds of offences reported by the superintendent, five were considered serious by the Lieutenant Governor's resolution. The discussion of these five crimes might give some interesting findings about the criminality of this district. In case of homicide the yearly average number for each district of Bengal province was 16.5 for the 8 years from 1843 to 1850<sup>30</sup> and for the Nadia this average was 12.88.<sup>31</sup> The districts, where the average was exceeded the Bengal average during the period were Mymensingh, Sarun, Bihar, Shahabad, Patna, Backergunge, Hooghly, Bhagolpore, Faridpore, Jessore, Birbhum and Midnapore.<sup>32</sup> Nadia was well below in the Bengal average and the difference of average was 3.62. In *dacoity* cases the average number for each district in Bengal was 16.41<sup>33</sup>, whereas in Nadia it was 52.5.<sup>34</sup> It is quite clear that *dacoity* regained ascendancy in this period in Nadia. Only two districts namely Hooghly and Burdwan with respective average of 76.5 and 75 surpassed Nadia in this particular crime. Other districts where the average exceeded were Dinajpore, Birbhum, Rajshahi, Murshidabad, Jessore, Bankura, Bograh, 24 parganas, Barasat and

Howrah.<sup>35</sup>

Burglary, as always, constituted the major portion of the total crime reported not only in Nadia but also in Bengal. In this period of 8 years, the average number of burglaries for each district of Bengal was 445 and in Nadia the average was 553 in number.<sup>36</sup> The table is showing the position of select districts in the list of burglary crime.

TABLE : IV  
Position of select districts in the list of burglary crime in Bengal

Name of the districts	Place held by point of population	Average No. of burglaries in 8yrs
Trihoot	6 <sup>th</sup>	1151
Dinajepore	1 <sup>st</sup>	1143
Behar	20 <sup>th</sup>	932
Patna	18 <sup>th</sup>	891
Sarun	22 <sup>nd</sup>	785
Bogra	28 <sup>th</sup>	607
Nadia	19 <sup>th</sup>	553
Pubnah	17 <sup>th</sup>	550
Shahbad	7 <sup>th</sup>	508
Bhagalpore	10 <sup>th</sup>	504
Monghyr	16 <sup>th</sup>	472

**Source:** Circular Orders, p. 255

According to the list, Nadia was in the 7<sup>th</sup> position though from the point of view of population it occupied the 19<sup>th</sup> position. From that perspective the burglary crime was on the higher side and also indicates that the offence was continuing at the rate of increase. In theft the average number for each district in 8 years was 397<sup>37</sup> and the same for Nadia was 244.<sup>38</sup> The average number of theft in Nadia is much lower than the Bengal average, but at the same time, it also increased substantially in comparison to Nadia's previous records. In case of affray again Nadia exceeded the average number of Bengal. In the period under discussion the average number of affray for each district in Bengal was 24, whereas in Nadia the average was 35.<sup>39</sup> The top three districts in cases of affray were Mymensingh (92), Hooghly (71) and Sarun (67) and Nadia was placed in the seventh position. In 1851 the total number of reported crime in Nadia was 2058.<sup>40</sup>

From the above discussion it is quite clear that Nadia's stand in total crime is below the average of the whole Bengal, but in relation of serious crime the position was considerably on higher side. Out of these five offences, Nadia exceeded the Bengal average in three offences namely *dacoity*, burglary and affray. Again, burglaries are really greater than thefts. It was most difficult to conceal a burglary as the *sindh* or hole in the wall or tatty, was easily discernible for many days even after it had been repaired. On the other hand, in many instances, cases of theft were concealed or not reported where the property lost was of small value.

The post of superintendent of police was abolished in 1854 and the Bengal provinces had been divided into divisions. Nadia was placed within the division of Nadia. Apart from Nadia, Barasat, Jessore, Mursidabad and 24 Parganas were included into this division. The head of the police of the division was the commissioner of the circuit and revenue. In his first police report the commissioner of Nadia included criminal records of previous five years of these districts. From this report some features of the criminal situation of Nadia district had emerged. Total crime in the districts of the Nadia Division in 1854 had increased in comparison to the previous five years average.

Table : V  
Comparative statement of total crime in the districts of Nadia Division in 1854

Name of the district	5yrs average of total crime	Total Crime in 1854	% of increase or decrease
Baraset	1146	1377	20 increase
Jessore	1840	3723	102.2 do
Murshidabad	3113.2	3191	2.5 do
Nadia	2993.2	2761	25.88 do
24 pergunnas	3697.9	4300	16.28 do
Crime against persons			
Baraset	705.6	882	25 increase
Jessore	1005	1361	35.42 do
Murshidabad	1262	1590	25.99 do
Nuddea	312	733	134.93 do
24 pergunnas	2344.6	2538	8.28 do

Crime against property with violence			
Baraset	80.4	42	47.7 decrease
Jessore	40.4	49	21.28 increase
Murshidabad	58.6	43	26.6 do
Nadia	244.2	339	38.8 do
24 pergunnas	--	--	--
Crime against property without violence			
Baraset	277.8	319	14.83 increase
Jessore	606.6	723	19.18 do
Murshidabad	836.6	857	2.43 do
Nadia	1127.6	1003	11.05 do
24 pergunnas	--	--	--

**Source:** *Judicial Proceedings, 25 October, 1855, No. 193*

In case of total crimes, every district within Nadia division witnessed growth of crimes if compared to the previous five years. Although crime increased in all districts, yet the growth rate was different. It was highest in Jessore where the percentage of increment was 102.2 and the next was Nadia where it had increased by 25 percent. In terms of number, 24 parganas stood first, Jessore second, Murshidabad third and Nadia was in the fourth place among the five districts.

Even after the period as mentioned, crime did not decrease at all. In 1855 total crime reported from Nadia was 2971<sup>41</sup> and in 1856 it declined to 2650.<sup>42</sup> Yet crime against property without violence continued to increase from five years average of 1218 to 1366, by a margin of 148, in 1860.<sup>43</sup> In this year crime like perjury and forgery greatly increased. Mr. Herschel, magistrate, remarked, the crime of perjury and forgery have very greatly increased, not that I believe the disposition to such crimes has been greater, but a very hot contest between two large classes has been carried on still larger classes entirely through the courts, and the weapons of perjury and forgery are resorted to as weapons under the circumstances. He also observed that 1000 forgeries had been committed and laid before the court of justice in the year 1860.<sup>44</sup>

Nadia, by all account, can be rated as an occasional high crime prone district. Heinous and serious crimes like murder, *dacoity*, affray, burglary and theft mostly prevailed throughout the period. Although fluctuation was noticed in some heinous crimes like *dacoity* and affray, these sorts of offences maintained their high position in the crime graph of Nadia district. This notion of high crime zone in case of heinous and serious offences was found valid in relation to other districts of Bengal province. This trend continued even after 1861 as a commentator observed in 1872 that Nadia stands high in crime of all descriptions fluctuating between fourth and twelfth district in total extent, except *dacoity*, in which it stood twenty first in charges made.<sup>45</sup> The high crime rate faced by the inhabitants of the district of Nadia naturally calls the question of efficiency and management of district administration, especially police department in question during the period under review.

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